

Notes from the eve of the Middle East Meeting at Annapolis, Maryland
November 27, 2007
By: Rep. Mike Pence

Yesterday I attended a series of meetings here in Washington D.C., with foreign leaders and colleagues in anticipation of today's Middle East meeting in Annapolis, Maryland, and I thought I might pass along a few reflections.

During the afternoon, I joined Sen. Joe Lieberman, U.S. House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Tom Lantos and two other Members of Congress for an intimate meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert.

As many of you know, I have grave reservations about today's meeting in Annapolis. After reiterating my abiding support for the State of Israel, I respectfully shared my concerns with Prime Minister Olmert. I told him that I believed the primary goal of such a conference should be a secure and stable Jewish State of Israel, with the establishment of a Palestinian State being secondary.

I asked the Prime Minister essentially the same question I asked the Secretary of State in October, "Shouldn't the goal, first and foremost, be a secure, stable, and permanent State of Israel, as a Jewish state?" I also asked whether the Prime Minister was concerned that the public expectations this conference could create might put Israel under undue pressure to offer concessions which would not be in her long term strategic interests.

Olmert's responses were candid and direct. After emphasizing his absolute commitment to the security of the State of Israel and his confidence in the United States to keep faith with our longstanding alliance, he defended his decision by saying, "a leader makes decisions by selecting from among imperfect choices." He said the path he has chosen was based on his conclusion that now was the time and the current Palestinian leadership was the best-suited to negotiate a lasting peace in the region between Israel and the Palestinian Authority. To my concern about Israel facing undue pressure to make premature concessions at Annapolis, the Prime Minister said that the objective of today's gathering of virtually all the Arab nations of the region and Israel was a "beginning of negotiations" only and would not likely result in any significant negotiations on the terms and conditions of a two-state solution.

Following our afternoon meeting, I joined President Bush, Secretary of State Rice, Prime Minister Olmert, Palestinian President Abbas and about 100 dignitaries for a formal dinner at the State Department. I sat next to former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, now the Special Envoy to the Middle East. It was a night of diplomatic cordiality and superficial charm. Before I left the dining room, I greeted the Israeli Prime Minister one more time with a handshake and a promise. I said, "I will be praying for you tomorrow" and then I said, "we are with Israel" and he smiled and offered a grateful nod.

As I walked past the long line of limousines after the dinner, trying to remember where I parked my 1998 Ford, I reflected on the historic sights and sounds of the day and I marveled at how little they had changed my view of today's event.

This is a perilous time for Israel. The emissaries of virtually every Arab country in the region and every major power in the world were all cheerfully gathered around the fond hope that Israel will yield to a global desire to see the creation of a Palestinian State.

It reminds of me of the optimistic discussions that preceded Israel's withdrawal from Gaza just a few short years ago. Imperfect choices often lead to unintended consequences.

I kept my promise to the Prime Minister this morning.